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ABSTRACT

Communal character, the ratio of credibility between a person's capacity in society for influencing others and the susceptibility to domination, is developed through continuous social discourse, and reflects an individual's or group's rhetorical status (the range of influence available through symbols within particular social standings and situations). Persons in communal characters of a high rhetorical status are geared toward the management of others, and exhibit certain leadership qualities, such as exercising more control over communication exchanges, employing pronouns that exude authority, and using powerful forms of speech. Individuals occupying communal characters in a low rhetorical status often acquire communicative behaviors expected of that role in the community, such as deference to the opinions and preferences of individuals of higher rhetorical status, adapting the speech of others, and using more polite deictic. In many instances, the distinction blurs between an act taken strategically for a specific purpose and behavior performed because of having been learned in association with persons of the same rhetorical status, and in confrontation with persons outside of one's own rhetorical status. (Twenty-six notes are attached.) (MM)

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COMMUNAL CHARACTER

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Individuals and groups possess a communal character available to them within their rhetorical statuses. (Rhetorical status is the range of influence available to individuals and groups through symbols within particular social standings and situations.) As explained in the second section below, communal character develops through continuous social intercourse. In the first section, the author defines what is meant by communal character.

Definition of Communal Character

Communal character is the ratio of credibility between one's capacity in society for influencing others and one's susceptibility to domination. Performing a communal character well may establish social, economic, and political credit among persons of the same, lower, and higher rhetorical statuses, though the demands of those audiences would be different. However, if the balance of credibility of one's communal character is biased heavily toward obedience, the person may be held captive in a socioeconomically and politically impotent state. The result is that various individuals, in part by necessity, imitation, choice, and invention, perform a communal character whose judgment and desires are valued highly or ignored.

To a degree, the prestige of one's communal character is determined by what traits, behaviors, goals, and accomplishments are valued by members of a society. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle explained how societal virtues are determined by means of rhetorical extraction from choices available to citizens in a community, rather than by nature of knowledge or scientific selection. Aristotle disagreed with Socrates, who believed that virtues were "rational principles."[1] Aristotle contended that "things that come to us by nature" -- such as the "senses" -- "we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity." That process is reversed, however, when the community establishes standards of conduct expected of citizens. Aristotle argued that right conduct is found, not in the nature of society or through scientific reasoning, but in the

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"practical wisdom" of the community. In towns throughout the United States, for example, citizens and leaders debate issues and determine policies that affect their jobs, residences, transporation, behavior, and values.

Citizens determine what is desirable in a community by exercising the range of influence available to them through symbols within their social standings and situations, "for the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them." In that explanation, Aristotle was addressing the issue of right conduct for the community at large; however, the author contends that behavior required of persons in high, middle, and low rhetorical statuses is also decided, in part, through social experience. "Moral virtue," Aristotle continued, results from "habits" formulated in society, i.e., from recurring ways of behaving and interacting with persons of various rhetorical statuses. Aristotle maintained that citizens acquire distinctive "states of character" through their acts. These states of character "arise out of like activities," the result being that a citizen lives a life "of a certain kind." Recurring attitudes, choices, and behaviors manifest communal character, whether it be one of a person of low rhetorical status, whose opinion goes unheard or ignored, or one of high rhetorical status, whose judgment is sought when important decisions are made. One's accustomed way of behaving, rooted in sources of influence available in a level of social standing, fixes the communal character by which one perceives herself and that others expect her to be.

Developing a Communal Character

A person's or group's propensity for dominating or being controlled, results from a number of interrelated sociorhetorical experiences. A person's or group's communal character is the proportion of credibility one experiences for persuading and complying. Whether an individual's communal character will be one of dominance, obedience, or some equation of the two, will be determined in large measure by the range of influence available through symbols

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within his or her social standing and situation. In determining the nature of a person's communal character, one confronts these kinds of questions: To what extent is a person under the dominance of others? What opportunity does one have to govern his own decisions and actions and those of others? To what degree is an individual or group free to create and adapt persuasive behaviors for special audiences and occasions? What range of flexibility does a citizen have, working from a low or high rhetorical status, for adjusting communicative performances? The process of occuping a communal character is due in part to conditions byond one's control that ascribe behavior, and in part to performances perfected through personal effort. Opportunities that enable persons to rule or to obey, and sanctions that enforce those communicative stances, reside in one's rhetorical status. The sphere of choices and strategies available for managing or being governed evinces one's communal character.

While citizens of high, middle, and low rhetorical statuses will attempt to invent ways of improving the quality of their lives, the number and kinds of social and political influences that can be created will vary greatly with the range of influence available to them through symbols within particular social standings and situations. Rhetorical expressions required of one's communal character are constructed from molds cast within one's rhetorical status. In his research, Rothman discovered that "specific forms of conduct are defined as appropriate in interaction between members of inferior and superior rank."[2] Just as decisions concerning what is virtuous in life generate among people in conflict and harmony, so does a person's or group's credibility follow, in part, from practicing behavior that actualizes community standards of behavior. Aristotle advised that "when one rules and the other is ruled we endeavor to create a difference of outward forms and names and titles of respect."[3] Persons' rhetorical statuses are prescribed by the availibility of forms of behavioral conduct needed to improve the quality of their lives. Their communal characters result from the kinds and potency of behavioral forms acquired for advocacy, in

contrast to those mastered for responding obediently. For example, a business person who has acquired the presidency of a company will have available to her potent channels of communication, such as the mayor's office, the banking establishment, the county commissioners, and possibly the judge's chamber. If that person is competent, articulate, well prepared, and creative, she can invent and implement policies that will achieve desired goals. At the same time, the availability of channels through which she enjoys the advantage of representing interests may be provided, in part, by circumstances beyond her creation, such as the good will or power enjoyed by the company in the community because of the hard work of her grandfather. Historically, because of the relatively low rhetorical status of women in the United States, some audiences would question whether a female executive could manage that company with the same competencey and results as her grandfather! This business person's communal character, then, may result from a combination of her personal abilities, contributions, perquisites of inherited position, and prejudiced attitudes in the community.

In many instances of human behavior, the distinction blurs between a rhetorical strategy, on the one hand, created by the citizen and adapted consciously for a particular audience and occasion and, on the other, a deferential posture learned and acted out from birth within a low rhetorical status or an authoritative demeanor acquired through education, training, and careful planning. While people have different opportunities available for planning means of persuasion to serve their needs, some markers of rhetorical statuses result from living within a particular socioeconomic environment and are less subject to instant manipulation for immediate needs. Persons acquire communicative qualities of communal character through interaction among persons of different rhetorical statuses. Citizens' levels of prestige in the community are identified by recurring means of communicative behavior. Social scientists have corroborated the tenet that the performance is the person, that citizens' communal characters are identified by their communicative behavior. In 1934, Allport and

Cantril found how revealing are one's communicative acts. They reported that "personality, physical characteristics, and occupation are likely to be perceived correctly by hearing a person speak."[4] Triandis and colleagues stated that the quality of a person's "spoken English" is an important determinant of "attraction."[5] Moe concluded that, by listening to speakers' voices, one could correctly identify their social standing.[6] Fishman explained how potent and pervasive is the influence of speech behavior in society. He found that language is "an indicator of social statuses and personal relationships, a marker of situations and topics as well as of the societal goals and the large-scale value-laden arenas of interaction that typify every speech community."[7]

Persons develop a communal character through birth, acquisition, or assignment, and master means of behavior available within the province of their rhetorical statuses that identify their relative propensity for persuading or being controlled. Persons enter society or, through effective performance, good fortune, or catastrophe, strive to re-enter it, in various degrees of sociorhetorical advantage and disadvantage. For example, a citizen may be born into a situation where there is one parent with an income below the poverty level; a second person might acquire great authority through conscientious and effective work habits; a third could be placed into a condition of powerlessness because of race or sex. Many individuals work within the same rhetorical status for a lifetime, where requirements of right conduct are founded, maintained, or changed through a continuous stream of social intercourse. The process of institutionalizing behavioral standards and forms of conduct expected of citizens of different social standings is one of a communicative nature, thus the appropriateness of employing the label <u>rhetorical</u> status. As virtues are created "by doing," so is communicative conduct that manifests various communal characters residing in different rhetorical statuses determined, in large measure, by responding. By residing in close proximity to persons of the same rhetorical status, and experiencing encounters with citizens of lower and higher rhetorical statuses,

citizens develop attitudinal, verbal, and postural behaviors that directly bear upon the range of influence available to them through symbols for social, economic, and political advancement or survival. By repeating obedient and authoritative forms of behavior, one grows accustomed to acting in a distinctive manner. Sledd indicated how significant is one's communicative behavior in establishing "class distinctions." He argued that even the process of mastering language contributes to a person's "place" in society.[8]

By repeating behaviors, persons in the same, higher, and lower rhetorical statuses come to anticipate a performance of authority or obedience. When one behaves habitually in forms native to a particular communal character available in his social standing, he causes persons in the same, higher, and lower rhetorical statuses to assume that he will continue to perform in a predictably submissive or authoritative way. A person may strive to learn more powerful forms of behavior, beyond her assigned or acquired communal character; however, the inertia of impotency inherent to a habitual conduct of obediency is powerful, and her efforts will be harnessed by images long attributed to persons of her low rhetorical status. Even individuals occupying a high rhetorical status, accustomed to managing the lives of others, must maintain the appearances of their communal character. They carry the burden, as Quintilian warned, of being certain that their "words are not unworthy" of them.[9] Occupying a communal character deemed by society to be appropriate and required for one's rhetorical status can lead to conflict. Frances Anne Kemble was transplanted by marriage from the role of successful actress in England to the position, in part, of wife of a Georgia planation owner; she recorded in her diary the dissonance experienced when caught among the will of her husband, the needs of slaves, and what action she deemed appropriate. Black women, who only recently had given birth to a child, convinced Kemble on occasions to intercede with her husband for an extended period of recuperation before they were returned to hard labor on the plantation. On occasions, Ms. Kemble approached her husband with the slaves' request. Because he

felt that she was violating the requirements of the communal character for wives of a planter class, he was angered by her act of intercession. In the passage quoted below, from Ms. Kemble's diary, one learns how persons are held in specified communal characters within rhetorical statuses by their acts and by the expectations of one's culture. Rather than experience conflict with her husband by communicating personal convictions, on this particular occasion, Ms. Kemble forced herself to leave the room, thereby conforming to the behavior required of her newly assigned communal character on a Georgia planation. Her unsettling thoughts, which she would only communicate to her diary, also threatened the respect she held for her husband, as she perceived him to be violating communal character qualities associated with a British gentlemen. "Mr. Butler was called out this evening," she wrote, "to listen to a complaint of overwork from a gang of pregnant women. I did not stay . . . for I am unable to command myself on such occasions . . . . I hope this sojourn among Mr. Butler's slaves may not lessen my respect for him, but I fear it; for the details of slaveholding are so unmanly . . . ."[10] One learns from this example that, although the wife of a wealthy planter, Ms. Kemble occupied a relatively low rhetorical status, and that she lacked the authority to extend the recuperation period for the young mothers. One wonders, because of being a successful actress in England if, in that culture, she was able to express her convictions openly, thereby enjoying a higher rhetorical status.

During sustained negotiations among citizens of various rhetorical statuses -- or by being isolated from decision-making discussions -- persons perfect old and forge new forms of conduct of various kinds and qualities that contribute to their power or impotency. For example, a person is born into a socioeconomic class, learns through imitation the behavior of family and friends within that rhetorical status -- such as habits of speech, accent, dress, postural movements, linguistic formulations, attitudes, interests, thoughts, values, goals, traits, and competencies -- and assimilates those attitudes and acts into a communal character accustomed to

managing others or to being told what to do. Attitudes and actions are carefully monitored and adapted reciprocally through interactions among persons within and without a rhetorical status. Persons practice and master means of posturing messages, thereby contributing to their own range of influence and to the authority of others over them. Morris Zelditch, Jr. explained how this rhetoricalization of communal character conduct occurs: "Each actor reveals how he defines the situation in the way he behaves, and thus provides other actors with cues to their own statuses in the situations. . . . Each readjusts his behavior to the definition of the others."[11]

By the way people interact through dress, words, posture, linguistic formulations, silence, and space, they are fashioned through circumstances, social standing, ability, and effort into communal characters of dominance, submission, or some melding of both. While people have some latitude in planning means of persuasion to serve their needs, some markers of rhetorical status result from living within a particular socioeconomic environment and are less subject to instant manipulation for immediate needs. Occupying an impotent communal character can leave one in a hopeless situation at the will of those who supervise him or her. The powerlessness of persons in a low rhetorical status may be sustained through isolation. In his work, Social Stratification in America, Leonard Beeghley documented how and why some citizens are captive of a low rhetorical status. He found that persons living in poverty are politically impotent, not because of personal indolence, but because of a lack of opportunity to persuade and a lack of "social and verbal skills."[12] Researchers have isolated powerless forms of speech employed by persons occupying communal characters in a low rhetorical status. These include the following: deference to the opinions, choices, and preferences of indiviuduals of higher rhetorical status;[13] adapation to the speech of others;[14] employment of more polite ("please"), deictic ("Like that picture over there"), and hesitant ("well") forms; use of intensifiers ("so"), hedges ("I think"), especially formal grammar, gestures ("use of hands and expressions such as `over

there'"), and questioning ("use of rising, question intonation in declarative contexts").[15] Social scientists concluded that persons communicating in forms of behavior that are powerless are likely to experience the following effects: be identified immediately as a person of low social rank;[16] have persons of higher social standing respond negatively to their "low-status dialect" and "nonstandard English";[17] "risk discrimination when seeking a job reserved for persons of higher social rank;[18] expect to be perceived as being less attractive and lacking in leadership qualities.[19] In contrast, researchers stated that persons in communal characters of a high rhetorical status are characterized as follows: perceived as being more prestigeous, competent, and trustworthy;[20] have their speech patterns emulated by others;[21] exercise more control over communication exchanges;[22] use language and labels that are oppressive, pejorative, and demeaning;[23] employ pronouns that maintain solidarity among persons of high social position and exhude authority;[24] have listeners respond positively to their syntactical patterns;[25] and employ powerless forms of speech (illustrated above) less frequently.[26]

In summary, individuals and groups possess a communal character resulting from the ratio of credibility between their capacity in society for influencing others and their susceptibility to domination. If one's credibility in a community is geared toward the management of subordinates, one is required to behave in a way suitable to that high station. If one's credibility is dependent upon obedience to superiors, one often acquires communicative behaviors expected of that role in the community. In many instances, the distinction blurs between an act taken strategically for a specific purpose and behavior performed because of having learned it in association with persons of same rhetorical status and in confrontation of persons outside of one's rhetorical status.

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